

Supervisor FRONTLINE

A newsletter from the WA State Employee Assistance Program

Questions



I read recently that depression may be contagious or an infectious disease. How is this possible?



We have some pretty uncivil people in our workplace. I'm not talking about

bullying, but instead nasty notes, silent treatments, withholding information, or not inviting someone to lunch. What can supervisors do? Perhaps I am just oversensitive and shouldn't care.

Answers



Major depression affects 15-20 percent of the population. A research report from Stony Brook University in November received widespread attention because its author supported further investigation into the possibility that major depression could be the result of "some parasitic, bacterial, or viral infection" not yet identified. Infectious was mischaracterized as contagious in other media. The two do not necessarily equate. Not long ago, stomach ulcers were determined to be caused by H. pylori bacteria, not stress. The idea is similar. With regard to the workplace, many studies have shown that employee morale can be affected the attitudes and behaviors of coworkers. In this sense, depression's effects can be "contagious" if behavioral issues of those affected by it influence others and negatively impact morale or productivity. Rely on the EAP when you are concerned about an employee's behavior.



Lost productivity, diminished employee loyalty, and turnover costs all stem from incivility in the workplace. Workplace incivility often stems from the absence of visible, proactive leadership and regular communication. If you have characteristically been visibly absent or you seldom meet to discuss team issues, start doing so. You may see some of these behaviors instantly stop. Employees take their cues from you on how to speak, behave, and engage with others. They notice your attitude, demeanor, personality, disposition, and how you treat others. All of these things play a role in influencing their behavior. You possess a natural form of power that comes from the right to be in charge, make decisions, and enforce standards. This is wonderful leverage for creating a positive work environment. Incivility is motivated by the desire to exert power over another, demonstrate frustration, or attain something desired. Tell employees you want a more civil workplace and expect it to happen. You will be surprised at how fast things can turn around.

Frontline Supervisor

Questions



What should I measure to know if my work unit is characterized as having “good communication?”

I would like to gauge the quality of communication and then respond accordingly, if needed.



Everyone in our office is smart, but we are all easily distracted. I am sure some of us must be affected by

ADHD, but we have a reputation for innovation and entrepreneurship. Is there any need for us to get collective EAP help or should we just leave well enough alone?



One of my best employees can be a little rough. He’s bossy, teases an intern about his intelligence, calls

him “little buddy,” and yells at him. The puzzling piece is that they get along with each other 90 percent of the time, go bowling together, etc. Should I step in and intervene?

Answers



A work unit characterized by good communication will typically demonstrate strong employee engagement, high morale, and the ability to witness a competitive spirit among a productive group of people. One or more of

these things is usually adversely affected when internal communication suffers. Delving deeper, the most commonly cited employee complaints linked to problematic communication are information flow between management and line staff, and lack of recognition and praise for employees. When you have a troubled employee or an employee who is not performing to expected standards, always analyze at least those couple of factors mentioned above and the role they might play in your approach to correcting performance.



Research has shown that distractions can consume as much as a third of the typical workday. These include interruptions like the Internet, email, chitchat in the hallway, snacking, meetings, etc. As an experiment, take

one distraction like hallway chitchat and intervene with it. Brainstorm an incentive program and accountability mechanism that includes peer monitoring to try to curtail it. An incentive program will allow employees to motivate themselves. Have a weekly vote to see who appeared least distracted. Back it up with an accountability strategy. The accountability strategy might be a tradition that allows any employee to call another coworker “off-task” if he or she appears to be idly chitchatting. Critical for making this experiment work is spending a few minutes regularly meeting and reinforcing the intervention strategy so it does not plateau, diminish, and stop. Consult with your EAP as they are experts on workplace behavior intervention strategies.



You should meet with your employee to ensure that any behaviors you consider offensive stop. Document your meeting, including his response. You are able to personally judge the behaviors as inappropriate and you

have a duty of care to maintain a work environment that is safe, respectful, and supportive of his well-being. These are bullying behaviors because they target one person and show a pervasive ongoing pattern of abuse. The intern may be tolerating this bullying behavior out of fear, or coping with it in ways that are beyond your awareness. For example, he may suffer ill effects like sleeping problems or depression. The intern’s socializing with his supervisor does not diminish the importance of the steps you should take. Consider a formal referral to the EAP if the behavior does not stop after your meeting.